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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

19 November 1956

Staff Memorandum #90-56

Subject: Probable Soviet Actions in the Middle East.*

A - General Soviet Policy

1. The chain of events precipitated by Israeli, French and British action against Egypt has sharply intensified most Middle East problems, and has created certain fresh sources of trouble. For the most part, these recent developments have worked to increase the power of the USSR in the area, and to enhance considerably Soviet opportunities to undermine the Western position there. The USSR will almost certainly move energetically to take advantage of these opportunities, and in doing so will confront the US with some critical policy decisions.

2. The USSR still probably wishes to avoid precipitating general war over the Middle East crisis. We do not believe, for example, that its threatening suggestion to the UK and France (about the possibility of atomic weapons being used against them) would have been carried through if the British and French had defied it. The apparent success of these blackmail tactics in helping to halt the British and French action in Egypt, however, has probably increased the USSR's confidence that it can vigorously exploit the present crisis without undue risk.

3. Overall Soviet objectives in the present situation are probably:

(a) to consolidate the USSR's claims to be the champion of Arab-Asian nationalism against the imperialist powers; and

(b) to undermine Western political, military and economic power in the area--and thereby weaken the West generally, e.g. by reducing Western access to oil and making difficult the maintenance of Western military bases and alliances with Middle East states, and

(c) to deepen Western differences.

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4. The USSR's campaign against Israel is an application of this policy tailored to the particular conditions of the Arab world. The Soviets probably believe that incurring the enmity of Israel is a cheap price to pay for the gains in the Arab world to be derived from an anti-Israeli policy. They are therefore almost certain to encourage a continuation of Arab-Israeli tensions, and to exploit the resulting opportunities to pose as the supporter of the Arab states and to embarrass the West.

5. In both areas of controversy, the USSR will probably continue its efforts to identify the US as the backer of Israel, the UK and France, and to benefit by the contrast between that position and its own role as champion of the "anti-imperialist" cause. In doing so, it will hope not only to further weaken the US among anti-Western and neutralist groups, but also to discredit and embarrass those elements such as the leaders of Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Pakistan who, particularly since the Anglo-French action in Egypt, look with increasing urgency to the US as the only power capable of supplying Western leadership in the area.

B. Probable Soviet Courses of Action

6. Vis-a-vis Egypt. The USSR will almost certainly seek, as a matter of priority, to insure that Nasser remains in power and that he maintains a very stiff position regarding both the canal question and Israel.

a. The Soviets will almost certainly extend support to enable Nasser to withstand any political and economic pressures aimed at bringing about his downfall. Such support will probably include assistance to overcome Western economic measures against Egypt.

b. The USSR will probably work to stiffen Nasser's resistance to UN arrangements which promised to give the British, French and Israelis any satisfaction. It will support Egypt in demanding that UN intervention be limited to restoring the status quo ante (e.g., that UN troops should merely oversee the withdrawal of the Anglo-French forces, leaving Egypt in control of the canal; and then serve as a temporary shield between Egypt and Israel after a complete Israeli withdrawal behind the old armistice line.) Short of renewed British-French military action, it is difficult to see how Egypt, backed by such Soviet support and considerable UN sympathy, can be dislodged from the present position regarding the limits of UN intervention.

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In these circumstances, the UK, France and Israel may refuse to go through with their agreement to withdraw.

c. During the cease-fire, the Bloc will probably attempt to supply additional military equipment, military advisers and possibly "volunteers" to Egypt. So long as the UK-French occupation and blockade remain in effect, Soviet ability actually to deliver the goods would be limited. If the Western Powers withdraw, however, there would appear to be no physical obstacles to aiding Egypt in this respect. Even if the blockade should remain in effect, the Soviets might undertake limited shipments by circuitous routes--for example overflights from Syria across Jordan and Saudi Arabia to airfields in the interior of Egypt.

d. In addition to encouraging Nasser in his insistence that Egypt control the rehabilitation and operation of the canal, the Soviets might offer technical assistance and personnel to Egypt to aid in reopening the canal. They will, in any case, probably welcome extensive delays in the reopening of the canal, as a means of harassing Western oil and shipping interests, though not to the point of appearing clearly obstructionist in world opinion, and of driving India and other Asian powers dependent on the canal into alignment with the West on the canal question.

7. Vig-a-vis other Arab States. The USSR will probably make increasing use of Syria in its anti-Western and anti-Israeli campaign. Pro-Soviet elements are already gaining the ascendancy in the Syrian government, where the conservative, relatively pro-Western leaders are divided and on the defensive. The USSR probably regards these trends in Syria as sufficiently favorable for the purposes of its Middle East policy, and is likely to avoid any open demonstration of control over the Syrian government.

8. The Bloc has already supplied extensive amounts of military equipment to Syria, and more is likely to come. Soviet military advisers and technicians, and possibly some volunteers are likely to be introduced along with this equipment. Particularly if the British, French and Israelis appear to be defying the UN, the USSR might send "volunteers" in larger numbers. It is possible that some Soviet aircraft is being sent to Syria by over-flying Western Turkey, though we have no evidence to confirm recurrent reports to this effect. In any event, Soviet equipment and personnel can easily be introduced into Syria through the small port of Latakia on the Mediterranean.

9. Syria represents an extremely promising target for Soviet efforts--military, political, and economic--in the Arab world. A continuation of the present trend would give the USSR a number of advantages, e.g.:

a. It would be in a position to encourage and aid Syrian blackmail and boycott tactics and further physical sabotage against Western-owned oil pipelines transiting Syria from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Especially as long as the Western Powers are denied passage through the Suez Canal, this

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would be of critical importance to the USSR as a strategic and economic weapon against the West.

b. A more pro-Soviet government in Syria would further weaken the military position of the Baghdad Pact countries and raise the prospect of Turkey being encircled.

c. Stronger Soviet influence in Syria would open up greater political and subversive opportunities in the Arab world.

d. Further Soviet influence over Syria would provide additional means exacerbating Arab-Israeli tensions which the USSR can exploit in pursuing its pro-Arab, anti-Israeli, and anti-Western policy.

10. We do not believe that the USSR wants to precipitate full-scale hostilities between Israel and the surrounding Arab states. A continuation of high tension short of war probably appears sufficiently advantageous and certainly less risky for Soviet interests, since they probably consider that all-out Arab-Israeli hostilities could easily lead to US involvement and general war. Thus, the USSR will probably continue its efforts to intimidate Israel, against launching full-scale war against Syria and Jordan.

11. If hostilities did develop, however, the Bloc would probably step up political support and military assistance to the Arab side, possibly including sending "volunteers" to Syria. In the UN and elsewhere, it would probably seek to take the lead in demanding drastic measures against Israel.

12. If Anglo-French military action against Egypt should be resumed, the Soviets would probably step up political support and military assistance to Egypt. They would probably make good on offers of "volunteers" even at the risk of clashes with an Anglo-French blockade. The USSR would also probably feel obliged to renew its threats against Britain and France.

13. The actual nature of Soviet action, however, in the event either of renewed British-French military operations or an Arab-Israeli war or both, would depend greatly on the attitude of the US. The USSR would be unlikely to make good on any threats of hostilities against the UK and France if it considered that such a step would provoke a US reaction involving substantial risk of general war. For similar reasons, it would probably avoid outright participation on the Arab side if an Arab-Israeli war should develop.

14. It is obvious, however, that the risks of miscalculation, on the part of both the USSR and the West, would be very great in the critical situation surrounding an outbreak of hostilities in either case.

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